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TAGS: [SMIG](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [SCUL](#) [ECPS](#) [PROP](#) [TH](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: SPEAKERS HIGHLIGHT MIGRANT WORKER POLICY, NEW TECHNOLOGY IN
MEDIA

REF: A. Chiang Mai 59 (Community Radio)
[1](#)B. Bangkok 1053 (Local Broadcast Media)

CHIANG MAI 00000090 001.2 OF 002

Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

Summary and Comment

[1](#)1. (U) As Thailand grapples with its policy towards migrant workers and in the wake of media getting caught in the crosshairs of Thai domestic politics, Consulate Chiang Mai hosted two PA speakers funded by Embassy Bangkok on migrant labor and citizen journalism June 19-20. Both programs were well-attended, and participant feedback has been very positive. The former program in particular was an opportunity for NGOs and government officials to discuss vexing issues face-to-face in a non-confrontational setting with an independent moderator.

[1](#)2. (U) Comment: These programs helped further the mission's goals of democracy promotion and enhancing international understanding. Treatment of migrant workers will be an issue in Thailand as long as the Burmese economy continues to flounder and the regime there continues to oppress its people. Building individuals' capacity to accurately report news will be key to Thailand's democratic development. Consulate Chiang Mai would welcome additional speakers on these topics. End Summary and Comment.

Migrant Workers: Drawing on U.S. Experiences

[1](#)3. (U) There are an estimated 2,000,000 Burmese residing in Thailand, most of whom are illegal migrant workers. The presentation by Dr. Philip Martin, a labor economist at the University of California Davis, about employing migrants in a recession, was therefore very timely. After explaining the roots of the current economic downturn, Dr. Martin focused on policy responses, ranging from the accommodating environment of places like San Francisco, which issues identity cards to illegal migrants, to other locales, which fine employers for hiring them.

[1](#)4. (U) Over 32 participants from several provinces of northern Thailand attended Dr. Martin's presentation, representing provincial and local government, immigration, the judiciary, law enforcement, and NGOs, including ethnic Burmese groups that advocate on behalf of migrant workers. The Deputy Governor of Tak Province, which borders Burma and is home to thousands of Burmese migrant workers, attended for the full day.

15. (U) The discussion was lively, with questions covering topics such as social security, wages, benefits, workmen's compensation, education for the families of migrant workers, deportation and healthcare. The afternoon session saw a civil but very lively debate between public prosecutors, health officials and NGOs in which they expressed their differing views regarding whether RTG policy toward migrant workers sufficiently takes the needs and rights of workers into account. That led to a discussion of whether NGOs were making proper use of the Thai legal system to seek redress on behalf of workers. Dr. Martin artfully guided the exchange, emphasizing that no country had perfect migrant worker policies, but that all stakeholders had to join together to craft measures that made sense for Thailand.

16. (U) Dr. Martin made three key recommendations for Thai policy toward migrant workers.

-- Migrant workers should be compensated on par with their documented Thai counterparts. Failure to do so gives a competitive advantage to employers who hire migrants due to the lower wages and fewer benefits they receive. Equal compensation would also benefit Thai workers, Dr. Martin noted. By allowing firms to pay migrant workers lower wages, the RTG creates disincentives for businesses to hire Thai workers.

-- Thailand should establish incentives to reinforce existing rules. If a company ensures that a legal migrant worker returns to Burma at the end of his contract, the employer might be allowed to hire another migrant worker, or might be given a tax break. Workers who voluntarily return could be reimbursed the funds they paid into the Thai Social Security system.

-- The Thai Government, instead of unilaterally announcing new migrant worker policies as it has done in the past, should work consultatively with NGOs and other actors to craft a better, more equal policy from the outset. These insights were

CHIANG MAI 00000090 002.2 OF 002

particularly relevant since Dr. Martin previously worked at the Thai Ministry of Labor.

Dr. Martin used his closing remarks to emphasize that managing migration is an adaptive process, not a problem to be solved. Employers, migrant workers, and local workers will all respond to changes in migration and labor policy, creating a need for future policy revisions. Thus, government officials and relevant stakeholders must be willing to engage in ongoing and honest debates about the trade-offs inherent in any migration policy change.

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Applying New Technology to Old Media
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17. (SBU) In a separate program, journalism professor Suzanne McBride of Columbia College in Chicago held three sessions and gave two on-camera interviews on the topic of citizen journalism. The first of her sessions was hosted by Internews, an organization that trains Burmese journalists in northern Thailand with USG funding. Internews brought together more than nine citizen journalists from several northern Thailand-based exile media outlets for a discussion and interactive workshop on how to be an effective citizen journalist, and how to apply new technology to one's work. A group of trainees conducted an on-camera interview with Ms. McBride after the June 19 session.

18. (U) On June 20, Ms. McBride gave a talk to over 30 community radio operators from several northern Thai provinces, focusing on how to take full advantage of new technologies like i-Phone, Vimeo, Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites.

19. (U) She also gave audience members, whose stations cover issues ranging from cultural preservation to environmental protection, a chance to voice their biggest challenges as community radio operators, to which she responded by providing

practical suggestions on how to address the issues. Challenges discussed included fund-raising and volunteer recruitment. Ms. McBride also shared some new citizen journalism techniques, such as allowing competitors to run one's stories to ensure wide dissemination.

¶10. (U) The same afternoon, Ms. McBride provided hands-on training to university students and citizen journalists working for the Thai Public Broadcasting Service on the basic principles of citizen journalism. As part of the workshop, she broke the audience into small groups to discuss interviewing techniques and formulate an approach designed to elicit information from a person who is difficult to interview. After the group discussion, two representatives from each group conducted mock interviews with McBride, who pretended to be the Minister of Public Health, in an effort to pry loose information about the H1N1 situation in Thailand. After the workshop, several university students interviewed Ms. McBride for an article they are compiling for their school newspaper.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
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